

REPORT - CONNEMARA MEET MAY 5TH - 12TH

A party of twenty three members and guests converged on the Connemara Hostel for this Irish meet.

The accommodation was delightfully situated amongst trees and rhododendrons above the sinuous fiord of Killary Harbour close to the border of counties Galway and Mayo. The hostel is a converted country house at Derrynasliggaun, a few kilometres from the village of Leenane and we were made welcome by Farida Straub and her French staff. The midges in the car park were a surprise as we had all left our repellents at home, but they did help us unload quickly! However the wee beasties could not detract from the wonderful view across the lines of mussel ropes in the fiord to the soaring ridge leading up to the summit of Mweelrea in Mayo. Fortunately the same view could be had from the dining room too!

En route, John and Carol visited Marble Arch Cave, originally explored by Edouard Martel in 1895 and much extended by the YRC in 1935 (shades of Gaping Gill!). YRC explorers were referred to several times by the guide. The cave now has a visitor centre and is the focus of a global geopark. The Manager was so impressed that YRC was still operating, he presented them with a goody bag containing souvenirs plus a geology tract!

The weather during the week was generally good, with most of the rain falling overnight. A biting wind from the NE kept us from getting too hot on the several sunny days, so we all got some colour in our cheeks one way or the other! The conditions underfoot were dryer than expected and few problems with Connemara's legendary pony-swallowing blanket bogs were encountered. It came as a surprise to members and locals alike to wake on the Tuesday morning to see a good covering of snow on the higher hills!

In true YRC tradition, climbing, walking, birding, running, road-biking and kayaking were all undertaken during the week with the odd glass or three of celebratory Guinness to finish or to accompany traditional music in Malloy's bar in Westport or Lowry's in Clifden. Lovers of Ardbeg or Laphroaig should sample Cooley's Connemara peated single malt whiskey (where Islay meets Ireland) - it combines the best of both - the smokiness associated with an Islay malt and the sweetness and smoothness of an Irish whiskey.

There was an activity centre just up the road from the hostel and one of the sights not to be missed were the participants emerging from the bog run (more of a wade really) - all having a brown tidemark just above or below the collar bone depending on stature!

Archaeological sites including megalithic tombs, standing stones, stone rows, ring forts, *fulachtaí fia* (Google it!) and holy wells added interest as well as the legends of kings and fairies. Numerous gable-ended ruins and abandoned lazy beds testified to the mass emigration that followed the appalling deprivations of the Great Famine years.

Despite foreign tourism spending being about €3bn to €5bn (when total public expenditure on goods and services is only €28bn) and widespread advertising of its scenic delights, it remains a mystery why they make so little effort to accommodate tourist access to the hills. Access points are few and unsigned unless they are on one of the few official 'Ways' and these are as often on roads as across the hills. Dogs, even on leads, are unwelcome here though generally acceptable throughout England, Wales and Scotland.

The tourist authorities 'development' on Diamond Hill with its National Park centre and trails undoubtedly encourages but constrains access there since it provides wide engineered tracks to the summit. A lower cost, less intrusive project with greater impact might have been to agree access points with local landowners, provide modest roadside hard standing and install signage. The financial return could be considerable as almost half of foreign tourism spending ends up as badly needed tax income for the government - that would be over £200 alone just for the evening we went out for a meal together. Our experience over the last three trips to Ireland of blocked official ways, inadequate mapping and difficulties with farmers is discouraging and surely not what that nation needs.

The following should give you our impressions of an excellent week of activities in good company - there will be many takers for a return visit as there is so much more to do, despite a few obstacles to be overcome.

Diamond Hill

This highlight of the Connemara National Park was tackled by several parties on different days from the visitor centre.



Above the approach to Diamond Hill
and overleaf
the summit and views off it



Looking seaward down Killary Harbour and below,



Killary Harbour

Several groups enjoyed a walk along the length of Killary fiord via the Famine Relief Road which hugs the shoreline from the sheep farm to the Killary Harbour. Superb views of the fiord and mussel fishing operations down to the coast and islands with fine views of the Mweelrea range opposite. Various higher level routes were employed to return. A number went round the promontory to climb up Foher Hill from the rear, before dropping back to the fiord side track and the return home. Others stayed high and returned over Lettertrin.

Carrot Ridge

Inevitably drawn like moths to a candle, three ropes of three simultaneously tackled the quartzite of Carrot Ridge, the stand-out line on Bencorr visible from afar and illuminated by the morning sun. It was named the Carrot Ridge by Joss Lynam and Liam Ó Réagain who believed they were completing the first ascent in the 1949, though they later learned that some Cambridge students had already climbed it in 1933.



Looking inland up Killary Harbour



Richard Taylor on the ridge



Nick Welch on the ridge



Approaching Ben Carr on Carrot Ridge

The Gleninagh valley was surprisingly dry facilitating a direct approach to the large pale coloured slab marking the beginning of the 370m route. We all enjoyed an excellent climb up the seven Diff pitches of clean rock admixed with some easier scrambling to the summit of Binn an tSaighdiura (Soldier's Peak) and then on to Bencorr itself. One party returned via Bencollaghduff and the Maumina col while the other completed a traverse over Derryclare, all having enjoyed the splendid views of the Twelve Bens around the Glencoaghan horseshoe to the SW and the Maumturks to the NE.



Mweelrea from Foher

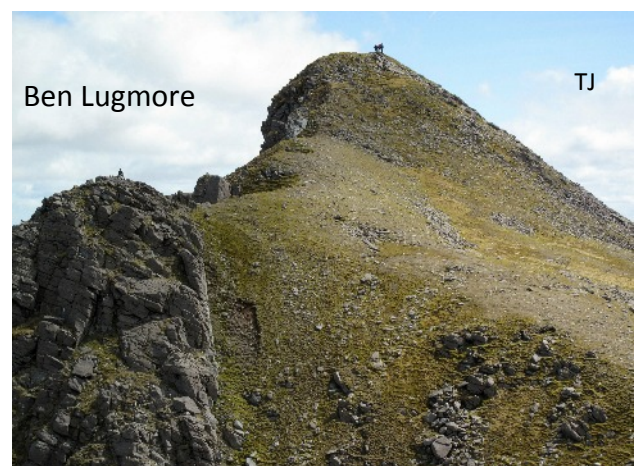
This fine viewpoint (at 814m, the eighth highest peak in Ireland) was reached by two parties. One group started near the memorial to those who perished after the 1849 famine walk to Delphi Lodge and completed their traverse to the Delphi Adventure Centre. This route crossed between the lakes of Doo Lough and Glencuilin Lough gaining the ridge by a linear feature known as the Ramp (allegedly frequented by Finbarra, king of the Connaught fairies). The other pair started at Delphi and completed an anti-clockwise high level circuit. Both parties enjoyed the airy ridge between Ben Lugmore and Ben Bury.



Carrot Ridge across Gleaning

MB

Approaching the ridge



Ben Lugmore



Descent from Mweelrea

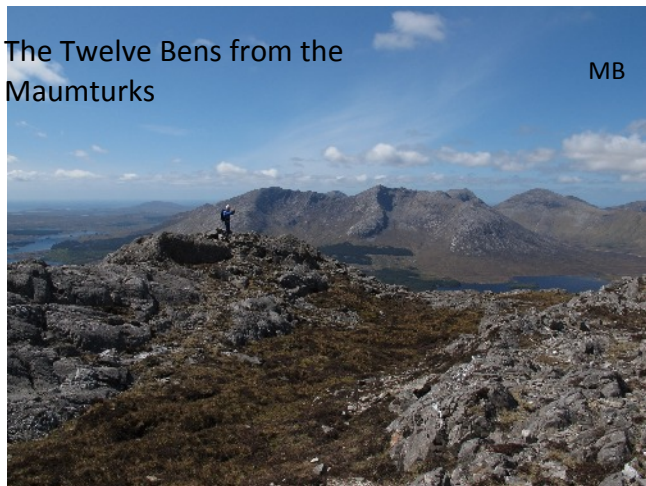


Barrsleivenaroy, Maumturks

The Maumturks

One party did a circuit of the central portion of the range starting at Illion taking in the lochan-sprinkled quartzite ridges of Knocknahillion, Barrlugrevagh and Letterbreckaun. The second group split and arranged a crossover: those from the SE using the Western Way to the Holy Well and crossing Derryvealawauma, Binn idir an Da Log and on to Letterbreckaun then back and down near Finnislgin while the others started from Illion West and traversed the tops between the lochan and the Holy Well. The two groups conveniently met for a communal lunch at a sheltered spot on the ridge.

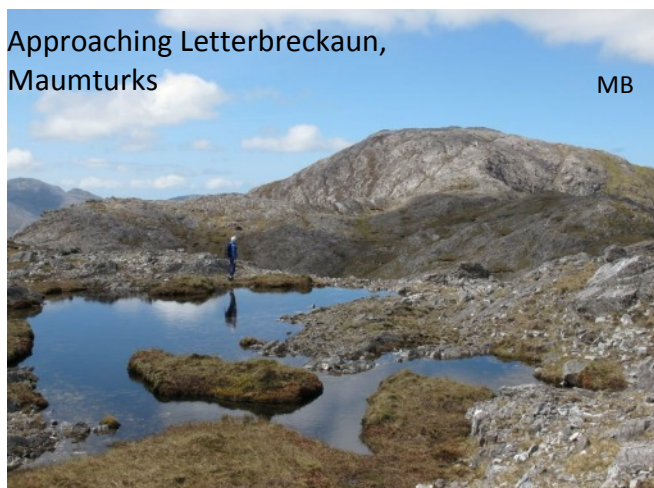
Yet a third group, wishing to avoid the use of cars, walked in from the hostel using the Western Way aiming for the northern end of the main Maumturks range. The choice of attack point was to prove poor with appalling underfoot conditions and having achieved one of the lower cols they elected to use one of the very few paths in the area to contour round the shoulder of Tooreenacoona and then across the valley of bog to rejoin the Western Way, returning by a variant of that route to create a figure of eight.



The Twelve Bens from the Maumturks



Following the Western Way through Lettershanbally Forest to approach Maumturks from west.



Approaching Letterbreckaun, Maumturks

Ben Maum

One couple ascended Ben Maum but did not complete the fine horseshoe which would have included Benbrack and Knockbrack. They returned by scenic coast route, visiting a castle on the Tully peninsula.

Sheeffry Hills

On the last day, Mayo's Sheeffry Hills were tackled west-to-east from the 1849 Famine memorial on the Glen Keen col. The bog soon gave a steep grassy then scree ascent to the several kilometres of flat ridge flanked by steep drops after the first top. A descent to the south gave some shelter for lunch out of the biting northerly wind. A turn south after the

third summit had the party scattering hares, shedding layers and descending via a forest track near Tawnyard to Glendavock and pre-placed waiting cars.



Taking a breather on Sheeffry

Silver and White Strands

These beautiful shell sand beaches with accompanying sand dunes and machair in South Mayo were visited by several parties to enjoy a scenic coastal walk when the clag was down on the tops.

Knocknagur, Knockaunbaun and Gleann Glaise

One group did a round including this ridge to the northeast of the Maumturks mountains ascending via an isolated 'fairy thorn' returning along the Gleann Glaise where the last wolf in Connemara is supposed to have been shot.



The Fairy Thorn

Glengowla Mine

One couple visited this showmine near Oughterard, which proved to be 45m deep, spiralling down through different levels. It was worked for galena and various other minerals and is now preserved as a museum.

The surface gear, including horse-powered winding gear has been preserved and there is a nature trail being developed - well worth a visit.

Kylemore Abbey

Several parties visited nearby Kylemore Abbey on the wet days, an imposing castle built in the 1870's in a stunning location, with a very impressive Victorian walled garden.



Leenane Hill/Northern Maumturks

Situated between the hostel and the village of Leenane, this grassy hill was tackled from either end by a number of parties.

Omey Island

This small island was reached across a tidal strand and a lane quickly led to a sandy path circumnavigating the island finishing at Omey graveyard with its tall granite crosses silhouetted against the lumpy dark outline of mountain peaks and ridges of the Twelve Bens in the distance.



Attending

Mick Borroff (leader)	David Hick	Roy Swinden (G)
Kevin Brown	Tim Josephy	Richard Taylor
Peter Chadwick	Dave Martindale	Hilary Tearle (G)
Ann Chadwick (G)	Michael Smith	Nick Welch
Roy Denney	Helen Smith (G)	Carol Whalley (G)
Adrian Dixon	Richard Smith	John Whalley
Iain Gilmour	Chris Luby (G)	
Bob Haskins (G)	Dee Richards (G)	
	Chris Swinden (G)	